

Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
When Regimes Fall: The Challenge of Securing Lethal Weapons
Opening Statement - Chairman Ed Royce
July 18, 2012

The Subcommittee today examines the challenge of securing lethal weapons as regimes fall. The cases of Libya and Syria highlight this challenge. Indeed, the Syrian regime is imploding as we speak.

Helped by the Soviet Union in the 1980s --and Iran today-- Syria has long had an active chemical weapons program. This includes mustard gas, sarin and VX, some of the most dangerous chemicals on the planet, much of it weaponized. Syria has been called a chemical weapons “superpower.”

For months, Administration officials have told Congress that these chemical weapons are secure. But now there are reports that they are being moved. This week, a Syrian ambassador who defected said he was “convinced” Assad would use these weapons against the population.

Also possible is a scenario in which the Assad regime loses control over its chemical weapons, leaving them susceptible to looters, opposition groups, or terrorists. Al-Qaeda’s interest in obtaining chemical and biological weapons is documented. Others believe that Iranian agents or Hezbollah could be in the hunt for Syria’s chemical weapons.

With the scope of Syria's WMD program, Defense Secretary Panetta has testified that the situation in Syria is “100 times worse” than the challenge of securing weapons in Libya. Some are concerned that the Administration has been slow to the game. As we will hear today, there are critical steps the United States should be taking:

- Reaching out to elements of the Syrian army that have knowledge of or control over the chemical weapons – let them know they’ll be rewarded if they keep them under wraps, or punished if not. And sending that same message to the opposition;
- Working closely with regional allies on contingency plans, intelligence sharing and military training so that they are in the lead;
- Building-up our intelligence-gathering network inside Syria;
- Making it clear to any future Syrian government that recognition and support will depend upon these weapons being controlled and destroyed; and
- Being prepared to act decisively if we know of these weapons falling into hostile hands.

Given the magnitude of this challenge, it is discouraging that one witness with firsthand experience tackling these issues will testify that it isn’t just the chaotic situation in Syria that presents challenges, but our inefficient government bureaucracy too: “Years of adding more and more offices, ranking positions and staff...results in a slower and more cumbersome decision process...” and impacts effectiveness.

This Subcommittee has spent a good amount of time focused on loose shoulder-fired missiles, which terrorists have used against commercial aircraft. Earlier this year, the top U.S. official

charged with tracking them in Libya was blunt: “How many are still missing? The frank answer is: We don’t know, and probably never will.” Well, it's likely in the thousands.

A point of this hearing is to learn from the Libya experience. After the Assad regime falls, let’s not be hearing from the Administration that we weren't very effective securing these weapons, under what admittedly are difficult circumstances.